



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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AMERICAN ALLIGATOR, RELIC OF THE DINOSAUR AGE, CONTINUES ITS AMAZING REBOUND THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHEAST

Slowly, the American alligator continues its crawl back to a brighter future.

The prehistoric reptile, considered a species in trouble as recently as two decades ago when it was first federally listed as endangered, has rebounded to the point that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers the alligator biologically secure throughout its range in the Southeast.

"We're on the verge of a success story with the American alligator," says Frank Dunkle, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "One of the earth's oldest species that had remained unchanged for 200 million years had reached a point by the late 1960's that it was rapidly disappearing in places where poaching had become a severe threat. With vigorous Federal and State law enforcement, sound management practices, and the remarkable resiliency of the species, we've reversed the situation in less than 20 years."

Today's optimism is in sharp contrast to the belief in years past that poaching and other types of illegal harvest had so reduced alligator numbers that the species would never recover. Through a coordinated series of crackdowns by Federal and State wildlife law enforcement agents in the Southeast, a major reduction in poaching was achieved.

The Service now proposes that the alligator be reclassified in seven States--Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. The alligator previously has been reclassified in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida, where the reptile's concentrations are the heaviest.

This action would change the species' listing from "endangered" or "threatened" to "threatened by similarity of appearance." This designation acknowledges that the alligator has recovered in these seven States, but technically holds the species on the Endangered Species List under a special category. That category indicates that American alligators, and particularly the commercial products made from alligators, could so closely resemble other crocodilians that the difficulty in distinguishing between listed and unlisted species could pose a threat to the species.

The alligator has increased to such an extent in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida that these States have undertaken controlled harvests of the species. Similarity of appearance provisions allow such programs, but impose rigid rules to insure that these hunts will not jeopardize the species and that the meat, leather, and other goods put into trade are clearly distinguishable from those from illegally taken alligators in areas where they have until now been considered endangered.

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The alligator remains one of the most difficult species to census because of its wide distribution throughout the Southeast and its solitary and nocturnal movements. No comprehensive national population estimates exist for the species, although night counts along waterways in most Southern States show a remarkable increase in the number of alligators spotted by biologists. In Alabama, for instance, biologists report a thousand-percent increase in large alligators between the mid-1970's and the early 1980's. South Carolina showed an increase of 1,633 percent during the same period. Smaller gains were indicated in Arkansas and Georgia, though Mississippi reported a small decline in the same study.

Overall, these seven States represent a small portion of the known alligator habitat and, in turn, alligator populations. Fully 83 percent of the water acreage considered alligator habitat is found in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida, where the species is flourishing and has, in certain locations, reached nuisance proportions. That increase led these States to petition the Fish and Wildlife Service to allow a progressive reduction in restrictions within their borders.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to reclassify the alligator to "threatened by similarity of appearance" in these seven States is open for public comment through August 1, 1986. Requests for a public hearing on the proposal must be received by July 17, 1986, at the Service's Endangered Species Field Office, Jackson Mall Office Center, 300 Woodrow Wilson Avenue, Suite 316, Jackson, Mississippi 39213. A complete summary of the proposal appears in the June 2, 1986, Federal Register.

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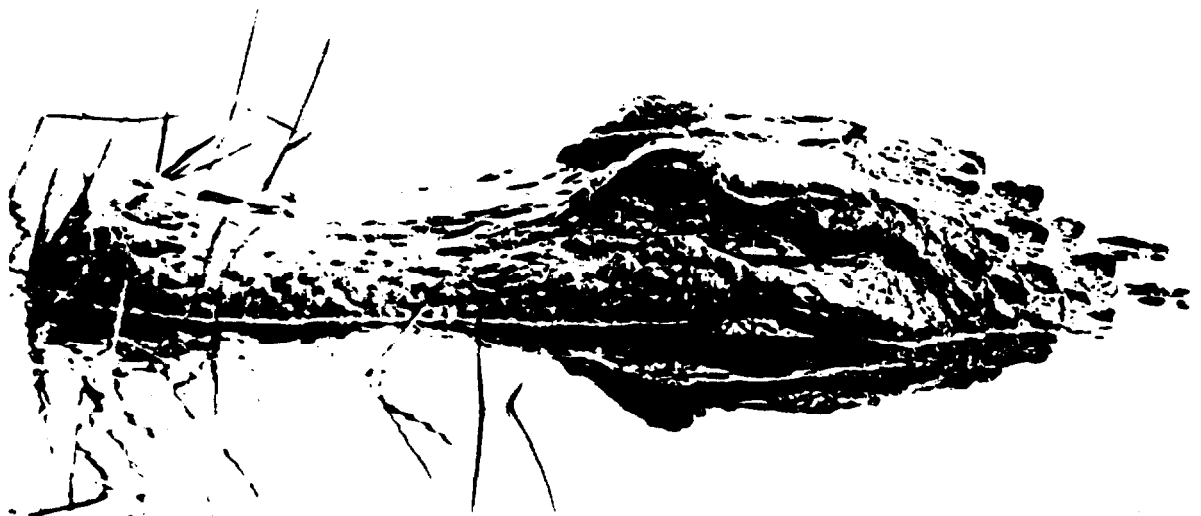


photo by Kirke A. King

Editors: Single copies of photographs of alligators are available on loan from the Audio-Visual Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 18th and C Streets, N.W., Main Interior, Room 8070, Washington, D.C. 20240, (202) 343-5611.